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DOI:

[10.1016/j.polgeo.2018.04.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2018.04.003)

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Craggs, R. (2018). Subaltern geopolitics and the post-colonial Commonwealth, 1965-1990. *POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY*, 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2018.04.003>

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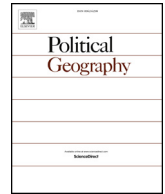
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# Subaltern geopolitics and the post-colonial Commonwealth, 1965–1990

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Commonwealth  
Solidarity  
Practice  
Subaltern geopolitics  
London  
Oral history

## ABSTRACT

Between 1965 and 1990, the Commonwealth - an association of independent states emerging out of the decolonisation of the British Empire - took on an increasingly activist role focusing on racial and social justice and developing new subaltern (geo) political cultures. Drawing on a rich collection of new oral histories with politicians and diplomats from within the Commonwealth Secretariat and Commonwealth governments, this article focuses on the period after the formation of the Commonwealth Secretariat in 1965. The paper argues that the political institutions of the Commonwealth acted as a site for 'subaltern geopolitics' (Sharp, 2011, 2013), substantially developing this idea through a focus on the specific practices, networks, and places through which an alternative geopolitics was produced. It makes four important contributions to the conceptualisation of subaltern geopolitics and to political geography more broadly. First, in focusing on the specific practices of political actors, the paper fleshes out the mundane, fortuitous, messy, and sometimes-contradictory ways in which alternative geopolitical projects were put into practice. Second, the paper highlights the role of social and affective relations - such as those of friendship and familiarity - in geopolitics. Third, it illuminates the need to pay attention to the specific histories and geographies that underpin political action, arguing that the networks and spaces within which key Commonwealth leaders were embedded reinforced and enabled the construction of a post-colonial Commonwealth geopolitics. Fourth, and finally, the paper demonstrates the methodological value of oral history evidence for interdisciplinary research in political geography, diplomacy and international relations.

## Introduction

After the foundation of the [Commonwealth Secretariat in 1965](#), the Commonwealth - an association of independent states emerging out of the decolonisation of the British Empire - began to take on an increasingly activist role. Focusing primarily on issues of racial and social justice ([Onslow, 2015](#)), the association, led by the Commonwealth Secretariat and the newly appointed Commonwealth Secretary General, began to develop new geopolitical cultures. These cultures, which substantially replaced those of the 'white' Commonwealth of 'kith and kin' which existed until the 1950s, developed through the contributions of new member countries, as British colonies across Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and the Pacific became independent, and through the staff of the new Secretariat. Drawing on an important new collection of oral histories with politicians and diplomats from within the Secretariat and Commonwealth governments, this article focuses on the practices, networks, and spaces which produced these new geopolitical cultures. I suggest that the Commonwealth in this period acted as a site for 'subaltern geopolitics', substantially developing the notion put forward by Joanne Sharp (2011a, b, 2013). The paper focuses particularly on the Commonwealth Secretariat and explores how, in the context of decolonisation, this new association created its legitimacy with the leaders

of newly independent states. It argues that the first two Secretaries General worked hard to develop distinctive geopolitical positions for the Commonwealth differentiated from those of the UK or the British Empire, but these colonial legacies also produced valuable commonalities - of education and experience - on which to build new post-colonial geopolitical cultures.

The Commonwealth has not received much scholarly attention within political geography or international relations ([Dubow, 2017](#); though see [Chan, 1989](#); [Craggs, 2014a, b](#)). Where historians have discussed the Commonwealth, accounts have tended towards descriptions of the institutional development of its central bodies, or a focus on the role of the association in particular events such as Zimbabwean independence or the end of apartheid (e.g. [McIntyre, 2000](#); [McWilliam, 2003](#); [Mole, 2012](#)). This is perhaps because of the Commonwealth's limited hard power potential and its lack of explicit engagement with the Cold War ([Onslow, 2015](#)), the dominant framework through which post-1945 geopolitics have been understood ([Ayoob, 2002](#)). Yet because the Commonwealth's 'areas of activity refused to conform to Cold War divides of East/West', it was able to promote 'collaboration of West/South and South/South on a range of power-political and developmental issues.' ([Onslow, 2015](#), p. 1059). The Commonwealth's membership overlapped to a large extent with that of the Non-Aligned

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2018.04.003>

Received 31 July 2017; Received in revised form 17 March 2018; Accepted 23 April 2018

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Movement, but it also included countries like the UK and Australia. Thus whilst the battle between the superpowers was important in the evolution of the post-1965 Commonwealth (and in the issues of development, decolonisation, and social and racial justice in which it sought to intervene), the association was neither defined by nor paralysed through the politics of the Cold War. Indeed, as Onslow (2015 p. 1059) has argued, in this era, this lack of conformity allowed the Commonwealth to embody “soft/smart” power that was particularly important to newly independent states and governments in the global south. Through its conferences, institutions, and other activities, the Commonwealth provided a useful venue for the discussion and negotiation of the processes of decolonisation and post-colonial nation-building, and an important space in which new diplomatic actors from the global south engaged in international geopolitics (Craggs, 2014a). In addition, the Commonwealth also supported new member states by making a modest contribution to the arena of development and technical assistance (Battey, 2016).

The paper examines the years following the opening of the Secretariat, in 1965, which marked the institutionalization of the Commonwealth as an intergovernmental organisation, ending in 1990, when many have argued the association's influence began to wane (Murphy, 2013; Onslow, 2015). Following the end of the Cold War and the demise of apartheid in South Africa, the association was part of a transformed and increasingly congested global political landscape. It therefore had to work harder to gain the attention of both the media and Commonwealth leaders increasingly engaged with regional associations (Onslow, 2017). 1990 also saw the end of the tenure of Secretary General Sonny Ramphal, widely seen as the Commonwealth's most inspirational leader (Chan, 2005), and the retirement of a whole generation of politicians, diplomats and administrators whose shared experiences, political networks, and solidarities were central to the Commonwealth 1965–1990. The paper therefore focuses on what can be seen as a crucial, distinct phase in the development of the post-colonial Commonwealth.

### *Subaltern geopolitics and the commonwealth*

Rising to prominence through the scholarship of the Subaltern Studies Collective, the terms “subaltern” and “subalternity” are watchwords today that usefully, and normatively, denote figures, groups, presences, movements and communities that historical records too easily forget or occlude (Jazeel & Legg, *in press*, p. 4). Whilst many accounts of the subaltern have focused on the poorest and least powerful, Sharp's (2011a) use of the term is slightly different, drawing both on the word's original etymology and on recent theorizing in International Relations. The military definition of subaltern is ‘a lower rank’ (Childs and Williams, 1997, p. 333; cited in Sharp, 2011a), neither in charge, nor excluded entirely. The value of this conceptualisation is that it draws attention to ‘spaces of geopolitical knowledge production which are neither dominant nor resistant’; to those who hold ambiguous positions marginal in, but not ‘outside the state and associated institutions’ (Sharp, 2011a, p. 271). Sharp's use of the term also follows Ayob's (2002) approach of ‘subaltern realism’ in which he demands that International Relations takes more seriously the experiences of the majority (those living in subaltern societies) in its theorisations. This expanded use of the term ‘subaltern’ to refer to states and their political elites can be useful, and usefully extended, as I show below.

With few exceptions (e.g. Sharp, 2013), work focusing on subaltern, feminist and alter-geopolitics addressing concerns about Eurocentrism has focused on grass-roots movements, every day experiences, and those excluded from the high politics of international relations (Harker, 2011; Hyndman, 2004; Koopman, 2011). Whilst vital, these accounts also exclude the voices and agency of post-colonial elites active in the realm of formal international relations, though from a subaltern position. In asking us to explore not only hegemonic or oppositional geopolitics, the term subaltern geopolitics can draw attention to the agency

and experiences of postcolonial political leaders. As Sharp argues in the case of Julius Nyerere of Tanzania (2013) and I have suggested for Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia and other southern African leaders in the context of the Commonwealth (Craggs, 2014a), whilst these individuals were part of a post-colonial elite, they were also marginally positioned within the global political system. However, this did not entirely curtail their ability to act within this sphere. Indeed, this marginal position was often knowingly embodied and performed by these leaders as part of wider campaigns for racial justice or international solidarity as they sought to ‘forge alternative post-colonial worlds to the binary geopolitics of the Cold War and the geopolitical economy of neo-colonialism’ (Sharp, 2013, p. 20).

The notion of subaltern geopolitics also helps to focus attention on the creativity and dynamism of this often overlooked group of political actors (Ayob, 2002; Sharp, 2013; see McConnell, 2017a and Pinkerton & Benwell, 2014 on creativity in diplomacy). Politicians and diplomats used the Commonwealth, alongside other regional and international organisations, to project and negotiate an agenda of racial and social justice for newly independent countries. Attention to these creative alternative geopolitical visions helps us to counter suggestions that subaltern people, ideas, and projects are always ‘place bound’ (Sharp, 2013, p. 28): the Commonwealth in this period was made up of a number of different ideas and networks, all of which were cosmopolitan, travelling, and international. Rather than being static and disempowering (McConnell, 2017a), subaltern subjectivities could be used creatively to produce dynamic, and often powerful, moral positions on a global stage.

### *Extending subaltern geopolitics*

The paper develops the notion of subaltern geopolitics in four ways. First, the paper fleshes out the often mundane, messy and sometimes-contradictory ways in which alternative geopolitical projects were put into practice. Attending to these practices can contribute to a fuller account of subaltern geopolitics than focusing primarily on speeches and writings (Myers, 2013). Work in political geography has increasingly shown how seemingly unimportant practices are central to geopolitical work (Kuus, 2011, 2013, 2015; Jones & Clark, 2015). A focus on practice draws attention to the making of Commonwealth geopolitics through embodied performances, such as conferencing, political touring, comportment and choices of dress (Craggs, 2014a; McConnell, 2016; Shimazu, 2014; McConnell 2016, 2017b). These aspects can be crucial to the success of movements and organisations, publicising agendas, boosting political support, and demonstrating legitimacy (Hodder, Legg, & Heffernan, 2015; Craggs, 2014a, b; Hodder, 2015; Jeffrey, McConnell, & Wilson, 2015; Wilson and McConnell, 2015; McConnell, 2017a). For associations, individuals and countries with less power and agency within the international sphere, and for new institutional actors – like the Commonwealth itself after 1965 – successful public performances were even more crucial, imparting validity and stability to sometimes fragile coalitions (e.g. McConnell, Moreau, & Dittmer, 2012).

Second, the paper demonstrates the value of focusing on the social and affective dimensions of geopolitics. As many scholars have shown, emotions and affective atmospheres, constructed through architecture, hospitality, and human relationships, are central to international politics (McConnell, 2017b; Craggs, 2014b; Dittmer, 2013). In what follows, friendship, solidarity and familiarity are shown to be crucial in the making and maintenance of the Commonwealth as a valuable post-colonial project. Friendship, often-overlooked within realist accounts of international relations, creates ‘affective social worlds’ through which particular actions, can be facilitated or denied (Bunnell, Yea, Peake, Skelton, & Smith, 2012, p. 491). Alongside friendship, solidarity should also be seen as an active process through which connections between people are ‘crafted and fashioned’ (Featherstone, 2012 p. 20). Whilst both relations are often seen as bringing together people who are alike, both can also be ‘transformative ... constructing relations between

places, activists, diverse social groups.’ (Featherstone, 2012 p. 5). As Leela Gandhi (2006 p. 10) has argued in relation to anti-colonial thought, friendship, signifying ‘all those invisible affective gestures that refuse alignment along the secure axes of filiation to seek expression outside, if not against, possessive communities of belonging’ provides a useful resource for oppositional cosmopolitan solidarities. Personal friendships and wider solidarities built on shared histories and geopolitical visions, and on common enemies, animated the post-colonial geopolitics of the Commonwealth. Whilst friendship and solidarity are actively built, familiarity is a more passive process. Many post-colonial Commonwealth leaders, diplomats and administrators shared a familiarity with colonial spaces, education systems, and political cultures; this familiarity was an unavoidable colonial reality. However, alongside the actively produced friendships and solidarities, as I go on to show, familiarity too, supported the construction of new visions for the Commonwealth.

Third, the paper demonstrates the importance of paying attention to the histories and geographies which produced alternative geopolitical projects. Specific forms of international politics emerged out of particular historical junctures, with projects and institutions often produced through ambiguous and contradictory genealogies which drew together varied experiences and allegiances. As I go on to argue, colonialism was crucial to constructing the Commonwealth’s subaltern and progressive political cultures after 1965. It shaped the educational experiences, ideologies, friendships and familiar spaces of a generation of post-colonial politicians and diplomats central to the Commonwealth. Rather than reinforcing British power, this shared history and geography facilitated the Commonwealth’s continued relevance and radical potential. These colonial networks were augmented by others, of non-alignment, anti-apartheid, and regional association, which were also crucial to developing the post-colonial Commonwealth. As Hodder et al. (2015 p. 3) suggest, political projects are ‘created and enacted through specific sites, practices and people’ rather than floating freely in abstract space. Paying attention to the macro- and micro-geographies of geopolitics and diplomacy is therefore crucial (Herren, 2017; Mamadouh, Meijer, Sidaway, & van der Wusten, 2015; Shimazu, 2012). In this paper, this attention reveals the specific and sometimes surprising spaces of subaltern geopolitics. Echoing Hodder et al. (2015) I argue that highlighting the specific histories and geographies which both challenge and enable particular forms of international geopolitical action is crucial to understanding how subaltern geopolitical projects were assembled and maintained. A key contribution of the paper therefore is to call for attention not only to a category of ‘subaltern’ people and ideas, as highlighted by Sharp (2011a; 2013) but also to the spaces (and their histories) through which these projects were constructed and maintained.

Fourth, and finally, the following account demonstrates the value of oral history evidence for extending our understandings of geopolitics. Alongside published accounts, the paper draws substantially on the Commonwealth Oral History Project (hereafter COHP) a large collection of more than 70 oral history interviews and two witness seminars with key Commonwealth figures - including national leaders, Commonwealth Secretariat staff and former Secretaries General - recorded between 2012 and 2016 (see [www.commonwealthoralhistories.org](http://www.commonwealthoralhistories.org)).<sup>1</sup> There are challenges of using oral histories that are focused on an institution like the Commonwealth. They can be internalist and celebratory, and like any retrospective account, provide the opportunity for post-hoc explanations, foregrounding the role of individuals, and nostalgic and heroic narratives (Onslow, 2017). Where possible, the interview narratives were cross-checked for accuracy with other testimonies and archival evidence, something that was easier for the earlier

period when Commonwealth Secretariat and UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office records were accessible (Onslow, 2017). Despite challenges, the paper demonstrates the unique value of oral history interviews for providing insights into political cultures, everyday practices, and structures of feeling that shaped geopolitical relations in the past.

The foundation of the Commonwealth Secretariat in 1965 is still within living memory of some of those involved in the early days, and because it was always relatively small in terms of personnel, the project was able to capture the experience of many early employees. It collected the memories of those working in a range of roles for and with the Commonwealth Secretariat over many decades since 1965 - including four Secretaries General, but also press officers, those in the Secretary General’s office, economics experts and lawyers, and former Commonwealth national leaders. Because of this variety, the interviews shed light on a wide variety of political practices that made the Commonwealth work. They not only allow access to the practices and relationships of post-colonial leaders, subaltern in their position within the international political system, but also broaden the category of the actor in subaltern geopolitics. They do this by providing insight into the experiences of middling bureaucrats - part of an international elite, but not in the highest positions - whose narratives are rarely made public (Alexander, McGregor, & Tendi, 2017). However, the COHP, like the large British Diplomatic Oral History Programme, did not aim to push further at the broad assumptions of diplomatic history about who counts as a political agent (Herren, 2016, 2017; McCarthy, 2016; Sluga & James, 2016). The work of many, including typists, secretaries and cleaners (who were often female) remains absent in what follows.

The rest of this paper explores the construction of a new subaltern geopolitics in the Commonwealth after 1965. This was produced in large part through the practices of politicians, diplomats and administrators, and the next section of the paper focuses on the role of some of these key people. It begins by examining the process of institution building at the Secretariat, highlighting in particular the importance of creating new Commonwealth imaginaries through new staff and diplomatic norms. It then examines how the first two Secretaries General embodied new Commonwealth values and a shift away from the UK, in order to build the Commonwealth’s legitimacy with the leaders of newly independent member countries. The second part of the paper turns to spaces and networks. It begins by showing how the Commonwealth Secretariat was embedded in other subaltern geopolitical networks after 1965. Then discussion turns to how the Commonwealth was increasingly animated by new places: new sites for diplomacy and new imaginative geographies around which the Commonwealth was understood to coalesce. Finally the continued relevance of colonial histories and geographies is discussed.

## Practices

According to McIntyre (2000, p. 135), ‘By the mid-1960s it was glaringly obvious that the Commonwealth was changing out of all recognition under the impact of rapid decolonisation. There was a sense of lack of direction, growing cynicism and apathy.’ It was against this backdrop that the Commonwealth Secretariat was founded in 1965. Whilst there had been a number of similar schemes put forward by various parties from the late 1950s, it was a suggestion by Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana that precipitated the Secretariat’s founding (McIntyre, 2000). In this, Nkrumah was supported by several African and Caribbean countries, arguing for more Commonwealth independence at a time when the UK was showing a ‘lack of resolve’ on the issue of Rhodesia (this was a year before the white settler Ian Smith declared independence from the UK unilaterally) (Chan, 1989, p. 397; Doxey, 1979; McIntyre, 2000). The desire for a Secretariat also reflected ‘a resistance to a British-centred Commonwealth generally’ in the context of decolonisation (Chan, 1989, p. 397). A memorandum, agreed by Commonwealth Prime Ministers, noted that the Secretariat should disseminate information, provide links, enable the exchange of

<sup>1</sup> Witness seminars are oral history interviews with multiple participants held over an afternoon or a full day with different sessions in which people contribute on different themes and topics, based on their experience.



opinions, and arrange the bi-annual Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (Doxey, 1979). Whilst this framework might seem modest – the memo also noted that the new Secretariat was ‘not to arrogate to itself executive functions’ – it was a substantial change from what had gone before.<sup>2</sup> This was an institutional differentiation from the British Government, moving Commonwealth administration away from the UK Commonwealth Relations’ Office’s administrators to a group of international diplomats and civil servants. This institutional shift was understood as significant at the time. The British Cabinet Secretary acknowledged that the setting up of the Secretariat was ‘taking the first formal step of an administrative kind along the road which leads away from the concept of the United Kingdom as the mother country’ (cited in McIntyre, 2000, p. 135).

### *Constructing the new Secretariat*

In 1966 the Secretariat had only 41 staff led by the first Commonwealth Secretary General, the Canadian Arnold Smith, an experienced diplomat (Doxey, 1979). The New Zealander Gerald Hensley, Smith’s Special Assistant, 1965–1969, remembers being ‘the first diplomatic officer to join the absolutely brand new Secretariat which then really consisted of Arnold [Smith] as Secretary General and his PA, Joy Tilsley’ (Hensley, 2014, COHP p. 2). Hensley’s background was in the New Zealand Department of External Affairs and at the UN, whilst Tilsley was on secondment from the Canadian Foreign Service (Mole, 2011), so these two early appointments were also drawn from the western diplomatic elite. Behind the scenes the infant Secretariat was also very reliant on the UK civil service in the first months. They lent the services of ‘a very nice, slightly eccentric, Bill (William) Cranston, from the British Foreign Office as an immediate assistance, and a very able administrative officer, Don Abbey, from, I think, the Commonwealth office’. Sir Saville Garner, Head of the Commonwealth Office, was also ‘an invaluable source of support in those early days.’ (Hensley, 2014 COHP p. 4). Many in the Foreign Office had known Arnold Smith from his previous Canadian postings in Moscow and Cairo (Smith with Sangar, 1981, p. 40).

These connections with the UK Foreign Office weakened over the following years as the Secretariat increasingly asserted its independence. Moreover, despite the initial importance of personnel from what was known as the ‘old’ Commonwealth (encompassing Britain and the pre-World War II dominions), this early period of the Secretariat was one of new politics and practices. Hensley describes the excitement and improvisation of the early days: ‘I was in and out of Arnold’s office all day long and we just scribbled things down and said “Yes, let’s do this” and I found that absolutely exhilarating. There was no alternative to operating this way because the challenges were crowding in on us.’ (Hensley, 2014 COHP p. 5).

Numbers of staff increased with early appointments including the Ghanaian Yaw Adu as Deputy Secretary General for Political Affairs, the Sri Lankan Tilak Gooneratne in charge of Economic Affairs and Development and the Nigerian Emeka Anyaoku as Assistant Director of International Affairs. These key staff members were appointed based on the counsel of others: ‘Arnold’s system was in fact to prowl about and get recommendations, “Oh, if you’re looking for a good economist, then so and so, if you can get him, would be very good.”’ (Hensley, 2014 COHP p. 2). Early appointments brought with them their own networks and contacts across the Commonwealth, as the career path of Yaw Adu demonstrates. According to Hensley (2014 COHP p. 4):

Yaw was the key man. He was well known in the Commonwealth; he had been Secretary General of the East African High Commission which ran railways and postal services and so on for Kenya, Uganda

and Tanzania, or Tanganyika as it was then. And he had been Nkrumah’s Secretary of External Affairs in Ghana but had left.

These new staff began to demonstrate the Commonwealth’s cosmopolitanism to new member states unsure of the value of the institution, and signified a shift away from Whitehall (home of the British government). Both aspects were central to building the legitimacy of the new Commonwealth Secretariat as it tried to carve out a space as a serious international actor.

The oral history interviews often dwell on seeming trivialities relating to this early period, and this is because of their value in performing the new Secretariat’s legitimacy. Hensley remembers ‘the thing that used to madden ... [Smith] quite unreasonably was when he was called the Secretary General of the Commonwealth Secretariat.’ Arnold Smith went as far as to stop a BBC interview when introduced in this way (Hensley, 2014, COHP p. 6). David McDowell, Special Assistant to the Commonwealth Secretary General, 1969–72 remembers this attitude lingering: ‘Muldoon [New Zealand Prime Minister] used to refer to Arnold and Sonny [Ramphal, Smith’s successor] as the ‘Commonwealth Secretary’. And he did it deliberately; he was saying, “Your job is to write the minutes.”’ (2014b, COHP p. 19). These slights mattered as Arnold Smith worked hard to develop the role of Secretary General beyond that of *Secretary* to the Commonwealth countries without ‘executive functions’ and with only the status of a Senior Ambassador, as laid down in the Memorandum (Doxey, 1979). Smith also fought for the Secretary General to be afforded the recognition of a personalised car registration in the UK in parity with other senior diplomats. As early Secretariat staff member Emeka Anyaoku (2013b COHP p. 15) recalls: ‘Arnold Smith wanted ‘CSG 1’, the [Foreign and Commonwealth Office] officials resisted that, but Arnold Smith had his way in the end ... CSG 1 was a fight.’

For the new Commonwealth Secretariat and its Secretary General to be recognised as legitimate and serious, such symbolic trappings were important. Mimicry provided one important strategy for building legitimacy in the sphere of international politics, and challenges to these assertions of status could destabilise these performances (McConnell et al., 2012). As Hensley notes:

you’ve got to remember the Secretariat was hardly known by anybody, “Commonwealth Secretary? Who’s he?” Arnold had to build the job and he did and he built it as a senior, as you say, foreign minister sort of job. And people teased him for his ego and his sense of importance. I don’t know how much of it was self-importance, but the point was it was critical to getting the institution recognised and accepted as something that you could deal with. (2014, COHP p. 12)

Institutional and personnel changes, and the insistence on the highest diplomatic conventions were valuable performances of parity with other similar organisations. They were important markers for the Secretariat in the face of sceptical leaders, particularly those – like Muldoon of New Zealand – in what was known as the ‘old’ Commonwealth.

However, these practices were not enough on their own to demonstrate legitimacy to new Commonwealth member countries. This required a second strategy: differentiation from the (colonial) politics embodied in just these diplomatic conventions. As McConnell (2017a) notes, for new and formerly unrecognised political actors, becoming incorporated into formal inter-state political spheres provides legitimacy but can also foreclose opportunities for creativity and activism that exist ‘outside’. Emeka Anyaoku, recalls that in December 1965:

My government told me ... that I was to be seconded to the newly established Commonwealth Secretariat. My first reaction was to say ‘No’; I was not prepared to go there because in my view at the time the Commonwealth was a neo colonialist organisation ... (2013a COHP p. 1)

<sup>2</sup> Commonwealth Prime Ministers Meeting 1965: Agreed Memorandum on the Commonwealth Secretariat, July 1965, Cmnd.2713 (London: HMSO, 1965), paragraphs 5 and 6.



Fig. 1. Sir Shridath Ramphal and former Commonwealth Secretary General Arnold Smith in the conference room of Marlborough House, 1975. Photograph courtesy of Sir Shridath Ramphal.

Substantive political differentiation was required to build legitimacy within the governments of the new Commonwealth member states in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. This involved an intellectual and affective shift from old style Commonwealth political agendas, and for these shifts to be successfully performed to post-colonial governments. The Secretary General – ‘very much the person who defines and projects the Commonwealth by acting, rather than by explanation or description’ according to one senior Secretariat staff member – was central to this process (Mole, 2013, COHP p. 7; Chan, 2005, p. 2014).

#### *Embodying subaltern geopolitics*

The first Secretary General Arnold Smith was well aware of the challenge of differentiating the Commonwealth Secretariat from the British Government, and the modern Commonwealth from the *British* Commonwealth. This section demonstrates how Smith and his successor Shridath (Sonny) Ramphal (pictured together in Fig. 1) worked hard to perform creative alternatives to the hegemonic geopolitical scripts of the period (Sharp, 2011a).

Soon after his appointment, Smith began the process of fleshing out a new agenda for the Commonwealth, taking this out to new member countries personally. In 1965, Smith visited several key African countries. Hensley remembers that ‘When I went out with him on his first tours ... that was his great message to every head of government, and head of state that we called on ... “The Commonwealth is now in common ownership. It is not a British club, it is not run by the British; it is run by all of us.”’ (2014, COHP p. 8). Whilst the issue of Rhodesia threatened to split the Commonwealth – as the UK failed to respond

strongly enough in the eyes of many to the white minority regime’s unilateral declaration of independence – Arnold Smith argued that the organisation could be a valuable tool: ‘Use the Commonwealth. Don’t pull out of it [over Rhodesia]. You’ve got a weapon that you can use if you disagree with the British. Here’s your loud speaker, use it.’ (Hensley 2014, COHP p. 9).

Mark Chona (2015, COHP p. 3), Special Assistant for Political Affairs to Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda recalls that:

the appointment of Arnold Smith, a Canadian, who represented a degree of neutrality in approach to issues, rather than a Briton who’d be associated directly with the Foreign Office ... assisted President Kaunda’s assessment of what kind of Commonwealth would develop, and that it would be much more focused, not only to look after British interests but overall interests of Commonwealth members, regardless of nationality, race, colour or creed.... Arnold Smith, his chemistry, his disposition, his gentleness reflected a very deep understanding of the kind of world President Kaunda was looking at.

This quotation highlights two different elements that were important in the production of Smith’s (and therefore the Commonwealth’s) legitimacy. The first is the distancing from the UK Foreign Office through Smith’s nationality. Second, Smith was able to set out a Commonwealth vision for the world which chimed with the perspectives of many new member states, and particularly their new leaders. Through his words and actions, Smith aligned the Commonwealth not with Britain, but with those countries becoming independent. McDowell (2014b, COHP p. 19) remembers:

right at the beginning, Arnold’s activism, his ability to persuade people, his straight out courage and stubbornness was really pretty important. Yaw Adu would crack his knuckles and say, “Arnold, do you think you really should do this?” And Arnold would say, “Yes, I’m going to do it.” And off he’d go. Or off we would go! [Laughter] ... He was prepared to just say to the British, “Well, I’m sorry. That’s not the view of most Commonwealth countries and so I propose to do this and that, and this and that.”

Smith was vocal on the UK’s failures in Rhodesia and in 1971 was strongly supportive of the new state of Bangladesh, which ceded from Pakistan following a bloody conflict. He successfully negotiated Bangladesh’s entry into the Commonwealth (despite Pakistani and Nigerian opposition), again reinforcing an alignment of the Commonwealth with the needs of emerging nations, even when this might bring him up against other powerful member states (McDowell, 2014a COHP pp. 12–13; Sobhan, 2014 COHP pp. 1–2; Smith with Sangar, 1981). In his oral history, the Bangladeshi MP (after 1972) Kamal Hossein (2014 COHP p. 6) recounts Smith gathering international support for independent Bangladesh, and visiting President Bhutto of Pakistan, ‘with a Bangladesh tie on’ saying “We are going to admit Bangladesh as a member.” ... Sitting in Islamabad, to have done that showed the intensity of his support for Bangladesh.’ These actions combined with advocacy for a Commonwealth development programme from the late 1960s to both perform and support the modern Commonwealth’s commitment to post-colonial nation building (Battey, 2016). Smith’s alignment of the Commonwealth with the concerns of its newly independent members was constructed through everything from his stubbornness and stamina to his dress, speeches, and private conversations.

Arnold Smith’s successor Sonny Ramphal substantially developed this reputation for post-colonial solidarity in his tenure as Secretary General from 1975 to 1990. Whilst Smith had benefited from being a Canadian, which, ‘cancelled what might have been a deficit in being white’ due to that country’s enlightened foreign policy towards the Third World (Chan, 2005, p. 330), Ramphal, Guyanese, and of Indian descent, was able to fully embody a shift away from the ‘old’ Commonwealth and towards one oriented to the concerns of its developing members. Whilst symbolically Ramphal’s nationality and ethnicity were

important, these were just one aspect his wider positioning that projected the Commonwealth in new ways. Writing early in his tenure, *Doxey* (1979, p. 75–6) argued that Ramphal was ‘of course, a Third-World man not just responsive to Third-World interests but sharing them’ and this assessment remains widely held, repeated in many of the oral histories. For example, Ramphal’s own successor as Secretary General, Emeka Anyaoku (2013b, COHP p. 15) argued that: ‘Sonny Ramphal, coming from the Third World and Non-Aligned Movement, clearly demonstrated the adage that the wearer of the shoes knows where it pinches the most’.

Those interviewed for the oral history project often highlighted Ramphal’s intellectual contributions to global debates, and to the standing of the Commonwealth, as he argued powerfully for economic and racial justice. Salman Haider, appointed to the Indian Foreign Service in 1960 remarked for example that ‘His vision and his capacity was quite remarkable and he gave the Commonwealth a direction and a purpose which I think sustained it for a generation.’ (2013 COHP p. 5). These contributions are understood in part through his ability to speak with authority due to his own particular position and connections: as Chan has argued, when criticising new ‘basic needs’ development approaches of the late 1970s, Ramphal responded ‘Why should we be satisfied only with basic needs? Why shouldn’t we have the Chevy of our dreams?’. This was, ‘the sort [of response] only a child of the Third World could make’ (Chan, 2005, pp. 335–6).

Even celebratory accounts of Ramphal’s contributions dwell also on his fashion sense and extravagant style: ‘his lurid, loud sports coat’ (Laidlaw, 2014, COHP p. 5), ‘he had a particular check suit that really could only have come from Guyana ....’ (Chan, 2005, p. 335). Yet in the way that these descriptions are repeated, we can also see how Ramphal, through his style, intellect, and charisma was able to carve out a highly effective space in international politics (on style, see Kuus, 2015). A powerful speaker who was able to build strong personal relationships with a wide range of figures (from Indira Gandhi to Oliver Tambo and Queen Elizabeth II) his intellectual contributions, ethnicity, nationality and even fashion sense marked him, and the Commonwealth more broadly, out as substantially different from what had gone before. Oral histories provide powerful evidence of the importance of everyday diplomatic practices, as well as public performances, in the construction of new political projects. They also highlight the importance of the often-overlooked social and affective dimensions of geopolitics. The next section develops this discussion in relation to ideas of familiarity and friendship. It moves on from practices to describe how networks and places also contributed to the construction of these novel geopolitical cultures.

## Places and networks

### *Overlapping connections*

Ramphal brought several overlapping networks to the role of Commonwealth Secretary General which also contributed to the differentiation of the Commonwealth from its earlier incarnation. He had established Guyana’s foreign service and was involved in the short-lived West Indies Federation, alongside the Jamaican Patsy Robertson, who had acted as the Press Attaché for the Federation in London before joining the Commonwealth Secretariat in 1966 (*Doxey*, 1979, pp. 75–6; *Smith with Sangar*, 1981, p. 46). Kenneth Kaunda’s Special Assistant noted when interviewed that he knew Ramphal as Foreign Minister of Guyana before they worked together again in the context of the Commonwealth (*Chona*, 2015 COHP). These overlapping networks are clear in comments from P. J. Patterson, the Vice-President of the ruling party in Jamaica at the time of Ramphal’s appointment:

When the idea [of Ramphal becoming the next Secretary General] was first mooted in London, it caught fire instantly because, certainly, by then, Shridath Ramphal had established his credentials in

several fields: in the Non-Aligned Movement, in the ACP group [African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States] where he was a lead negotiator, in the Commonwealth itself, and having participated as Foreign Minister in the Organisation of American States. (2015 COHP p. 5)

Through Guyana, Ramphal was embedded in the Non-Aligned Movement, which was important in securing his nomination for Commonwealth Secretary General. As *Ramphal* (2013a COHP p. 3) recalled, the Guyanese Prime Minister Forbes Burnham ‘wrote to all the [Commonwealth] leaders, but his strengths were with the African leaders: he brought them on board. And they knew me, too, from Non-Alignment.’ Through the Non-Aligned Movement, Ramphal was also close to Indira Gandhi, with whom he discussed his decision to take up the Secretary Generalship. And he defined himself through Non-Alignment: ‘My own personal predilections were non-aligned, and I came to the Commonwealth almost straight from chairing the Non-Aligned Foreign Ministers meeting.’ (*Ramphal*, 2013b COHP p. 9). The Non-Aligned network was important in the Commonwealth, with a ‘remarkable similarity of membership’ between the two, including several early active NAM members in India, Ghana, Guyana and Tanzania (*Onslow*, 2015, p. 1060). These overlaps meant that key government members encountered each other at summits with regularity, and knew Ramphal before he took up office as Commonwealth Secretary General.

Ramphal also brought with him from Guyana a commitment to racial justice in southern Africa, and the Secretariat became even more vociferous about the issue under him. Patsy Robertson, Press Officer at the Secretariat from 1966 remembers that ‘Gradually, we built up an Information Division and our role was to continue to be quite aggressive in spreading the message of the Commonwealth wish to end racism in Southern Africa.’ (2014 COHP p. 76). According to the South African ANC activist Aziz *Pahad* (2013b COHP p. 9), though ‘it was quite obvious that there was interaction between the Secretariat and the Anti-Apartheid Movement’ in the UK from 1965, these contacts, and particularly those with the ANC ‘increased dramatically after Ramphal came in’. These included Trevor Huddleston and Mike Terry of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, but also Oliver Tambo and Abdul Minty of the ANC (*Pahad*, 2013b). These networks helped to animate the Commonwealth’s political agenda in Southern Africa over several decades, bringing together the priorities of the Secretary General and the foreign policy focus of many Commonwealth nations particularly in Africa and the Caribbean.

These connections and commitments were important in performing the Commonwealth’s commitment to racial justice which often stood in contrast to the perceived commitment of both Labour and Conservative governments in the UK. This was important both for internal consumption within the Secretariat (*Dundas*, 2015 COHP) and for external audiences (*Dubow*, 2017). This anti-apartheid work is also central to retrospective narratives about the Commonwealth: they dominate in the oral histories as a whole, and are keenly recounted by those involved. Ramphal for example, takes pleasure in explaining how when he met with Oliver Tambo in Lusaka ‘We were then close enough to be “Oliver” and “Sonny”’ (*Ramphal*, 2013a COHP p. 10). It is instructive that Ramphal chose to include the photograph overleaf (*Fig. 2*), showing himself working for racial justice in southern Africa alongside Huddleston, Desmond Tutu and Julius Nyerere of Tanzania in his recent autobiography (*Ramphal*, 2014, p. 408).

These narratives – of the Commonwealth in the vanguard of the fight for racial justice in southern Africa – were performative (*McGregor*, 2017) and of value to key individuals like Ramphal and the institution of the Commonwealth as a whole. Those outside the Commonwealth working for the cause, in the UK at least, corroborate this view. Albie Sachs, the South African lawyer and ANC member in exile in the UK for much of this period, remembers that Ramphal:

stood out as a great supporter of the anti-apartheid movement, and





Fig. 2. (Left to right): Shridath Ramphal, Trevor Huddleston, Desmond Tutu and Julius Nyerere at an anti-apartheid event. Photograph courtesy of Sir Shridath Ramphal.

he gave more ‘umph’. He acted with more ‘umph’ and panache, and gave a lot of moral support. This was moral and political support at important moments, and that I remember very specifically. (Sachs, 2013 COHP p. 13–4)

Ramphal’s ‘umph’ here was an affective, meaningful force which aligned the Commonwealth Secretariat unquestionably behind this cause. As with the discussion of Smith’s ‘disposition’ in the earlier quotation from the Zambian political advisor Mark Chona, these oral histories from those engaging with the Commonwealth Secretariat from the post-colonial world reflect an intangible, but demonstrably felt, solidarity with their concerns, particularly around social and racial justice. The closeness of these relationships that Ramphal in particular brought to and cultivated in his role are clearly reflected in the informality and friendships captured in Fig. 2, which also allows us to reflect on the importance of ‘affective social worlds’ (Bunnell et al., 2012, p. 491) within geopolitical practice. In orienting the Commonwealth towards the global south, both Smith and Ramphal relied on a combination of public statements, material support, and more intangible aspects such as trust, friendship and solidarity.

#### *New commonwealth geographies*

Subaltern networks, including those of Non-Alignment and anti-apartheid, embraced and enabled not only Secretaries General and national leaders, but also those working at lower levels at and with the Commonwealth Secretariat. They tied together many of the countries formerly colonised by Britain, often without reference to the former ‘mother country’. Reanimating the Commonwealth, these networks placed Southern Africa central in Commonwealth imaginaries, and produced new geographies in which the UK (and the ‘British world’ of the pre-World War II dominions) were no longer always central.

In 1966 following Rhodesia’s Unilateral Declaration of Independence, an emergency meeting of Commonwealth leaders took place in Lagos. This marked the first time that a Commonwealth meeting would take place outside of London. From 1971 this became the norm for the bi-annual Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings, which became peripatetic, hosted in Singapore in 1971, Ottawa, Canada in 1973, Kingston, Jamaica in 1975, and Lusaka, Zambia in 1979. The Commonwealth conference circuit to some extent overlapped with that of the Non-Aligned Movement. In Zambia the

Commonwealth summit reused venues built for the Non-Aligned Movement meeting they hosted in 1970, whilst the 1983 New Delhi Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting was held nine months after the Non-Aligned Movement meeting at the same venue. Shifting the Commonwealth summits from London reinforced a new diplomatic post-colonial geography in which the sites for international politics were dramatically expanded, and spaces of traditional diplomacy – like London – lost some of their status (Shimazu, 2012). This geographical shift also altered the power relations between the UK government and other Commonwealth national leaders, who harnessed their position as ‘hosts’ of Commonwealth summits in order to showcase the progress of their nations or to focus the agenda on their own issues of concern (Craggs, 2014a).

London continued to be a Commonwealth centre, hosting the Commonwealth Secretariat, but even here, small scale, but symbolically important geographical shifts were visible. The founding of the Secretariat moved the administration of the Commonwealth away from the Commonwealth Relations Office (now Foreign and Commonwealth Office) in the heart of British government in Whitehall. The new Secretariat was based in Marlborough House, a royal palace loaned by the Queen for Commonwealth use, which was on Pall Mall (Fig. 3). The palace was architecturally grand and sumptuously decorated (see the interior in Fig. 1); ‘We certainly do not want to see the house cluttered up with statuary from India or Ghana, or even with modern furniture from Canada or Australia’ remarked the British Cabinet Secretary as the building was handed over (cited in McIntyre, 2000, p. 139). Despite these stipulations, the grandeur and location of Marlborough House – in the political heart of London but separate from Whitehall – lent the infant Secretariat badly needed legitimacy. Whilst this move took the Commonwealth administration only a few minutes walk from Whitehall (see Fig. 3), and to a royal palace, it was symbolically important. According to the Commonwealth Secretariat’s first Press Officer the formation of the Secretariat represented a desire to ‘break the links with the cosy business around the fireplace at Downing Street which the old Commonwealth had loved.’ (Robertson, 2013 COHP p. 23). This description highlights the powerful imagery of traditional Commonwealth relations – familial, private, and rooted in the spaces of UK government – which lingered into the 1950s, and is suggestive of the value of taking over new spaces for Commonwealth diplomacy.

#### *Imperial histories and geographies*

Despite these new sites, networks and imaginaries, imperial geographies continued to have resonance. In this section, I demonstrate how these spaces and histories, counter-intuitively, could be productive in the construction of subaltern geopolitics. Alongside the Commonwealth Secretariat, many Commonwealth professional associations and charitable organisations with imperial roots (e.g. the Commonwealth Engineers Council and the Commonwealth Institute) continued to be based in London during and after decolonisation. And London remained a city marked by imperialism. The immediate neighbourhood of the Commonwealth Secretariat was redesigned in the late nineteenth century to better represent a grand imperial capital (Smith, 2003, pp. 21–39), and the statues of the area continued to represent the British Empire into the twenty-first century (Schwarz, 2003, pp. 269–272). The diplomatic landscape also reflected the colonial past, with many High Commissions (the Commonwealth equivalent of embassies) clustered closely around Whitehall, closer to the political heart of power than embassies of important European or transatlantic partners. The Royal Commonwealth Society, a former empire club that became a central social space for much of Commonwealth political life, was also located just off Trafalgar Square (see Fig. 3).

Whilst much popular discussion of the Commonwealth can be criticised for unsubstantiated claims of special ‘familial’ relationships in the association (No author, 1983), tangible connections between countries and people remained into the mid-twentieth century. Shared



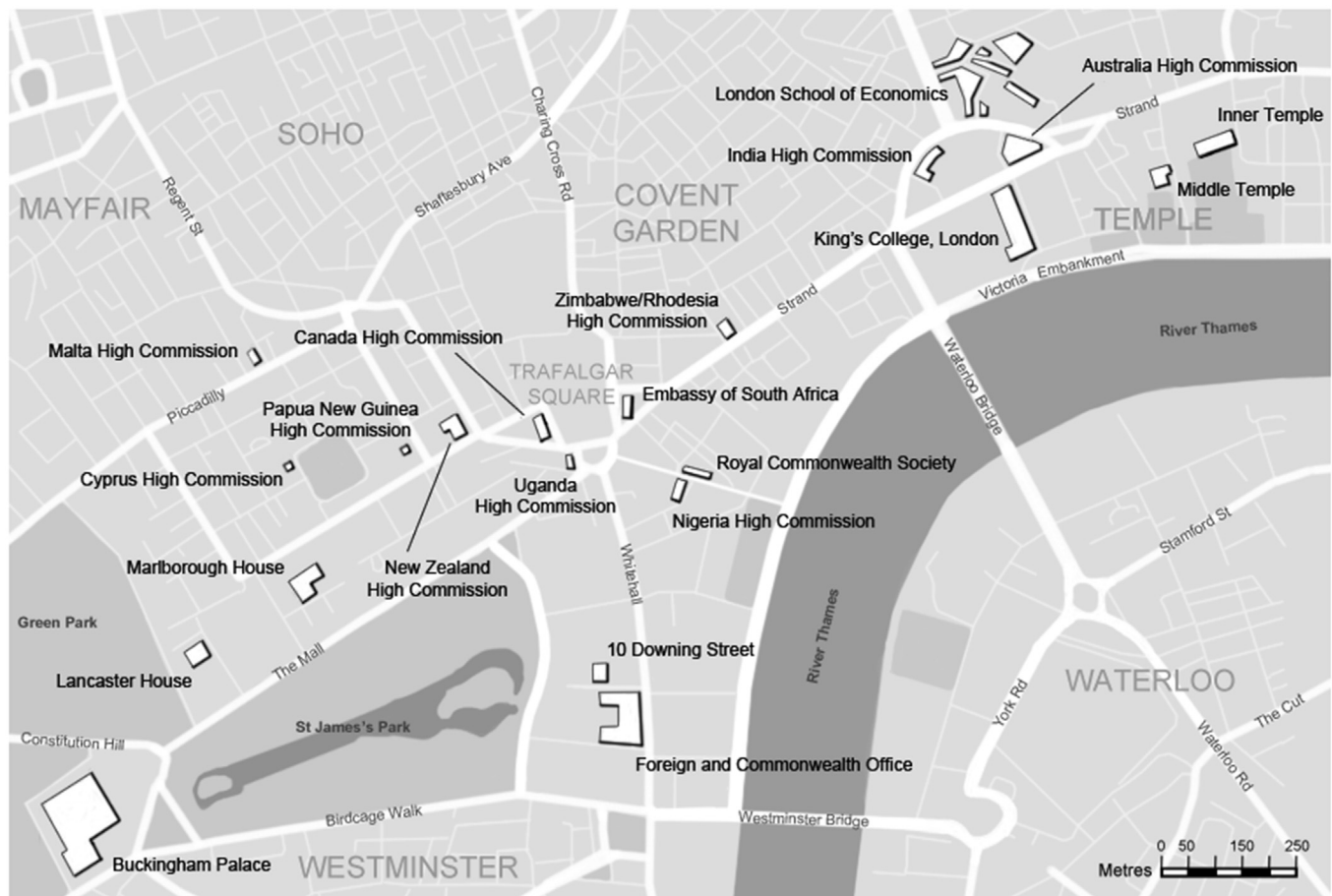


Fig. 3. Central London showing key Commonwealth and (anti)colonial spaces. Map by Ashley Crowson.

cultures and socialisation, crucial to effective diplomatic relations (Jones & Clark, 2015) were produced through professional associations, democratic procedures, patterns of migration, and education systems which remained intertwined long after decolonisation (Andersen, 2017; Kumarasingham, 2013; Livsey, 2017; Morris-Jones & Johnson, 1970). Britain, and especially London, remained a central hub for many of these networks, and many of the Commonwealth's post-colonial elites were familiar with the capital having lived and worked there.

Sonny Ramphal had graduated from King's College London in 1952, whilst Forbes Burnham (Guyana), Pierre Trudeau (Canada) and Michael Manley (Jamaica) were all at the LSE in the late 1940s. Others, like Seretse Khama (Botswana), Ratu Mara (Fiji), Malcolm Fraser (Australia) and Indira Gandhi (India) studied at Oxford around the same time. This pattern continued into the 1960s, with individuals like P.J. Patterson, the Jamaican Prime Minister following Michael Manley graduating from the LSE in 1963. Several Commonwealth leaders practised law in London's Inner Temple, Middle Temple and Gray's Inn. This pattern of educational and professional experience was also reflected in the early careers and education of many of the influential special advisors and Secretariat staff members in this period, who, in their asides and explanations in the oral history interviews, reveal the importance of these connections: 'I had lots of contacts with the South Africans. Some I had met at University here [in the UK]. Others I had met in the swim of life' (Anafu, 2014 COHP p. 8). Just as in the 1930s, after 1945, London continued to be a meeting place for the soon to be post-colonial elite (Adi, 1993; Matera, 2015; Whittall, 2011). Many colonial nationalist leaders returned to London during decolonisation for negotiations over the terms of independence. The *Times* reporter Bill Kirkman remembers London as 'a frenzy of activity' in the 1960s, with constitutional conferences every few weeks at Lancaster House (cited in Craggs, 2009 p.

159).

Although much of the built landscape of central London was designed to reflect imperial grandeur (Jacobs, 1996), it was therefore also familiar to many leaders of newly independent Commonwealth countries through previous lived experiences in the city. This familiarity made a difference. Though as colonial students in the UK they often faced racism and struggled to secure accommodation (Stockwell, 2008), during their studies they constructed support networks of friends and political allies, engaged with an emerging formal and informal political infrastructure (from high commissions to diaspora associations), and were made welcome in particular restaurants, bars, and private homes (Jazeel, 2006; Matera, 2015; McGregor, 2017; Whittall, 2011).

The familiarity of London mattered. Marlborough House was a grand and formal space (at least in its public rooms) which could be intimidating to inexperienced Commonwealth diplomats and politicians (on unfamiliarity and political legitimacy see McConnell, 2017b), but was located within immediate environs and a wider city which were familiar. In addition, the Secretariat sometimes provided a supportive space for visiting politicians. During the negotiations over Zimbabwean independence at Lancaster House from September–December 1979, the Zimbabwean nationalist leaders Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo were supported by Commonwealth Secretariat staff including Ramphal. At the end of each day, they would return to Marlborough House, and Ramphal's private home, for briefings (Anyoaku, 2013 COHP; Chan & Mudhai, 2001; Ramphal, 2014). Lancaster House was only a two minute walk from the Commonwealth Secretariat's headquarters in Marlborough House (see Fig. 3). The Secretariat, with its increasingly international staff, could be a welcoming space for new Commonwealth leaders negotiating independence and post-colonial national agendas.

As a result of its imperial history, London was also an important site

in international resistance against apartheid, as well as against UDI in Rhodesia. Many Rhodesian exiles studied in London, whilst also participating in political campaigning and fundraising (McGregor, 2017). According to Aziz Pahad, a central ANC and Anti-Apartheid Movement activist in exile in the UK from 1966, ‘London was the key’, and in the 1980s, ‘was declared a ‘forward area’ [for recruitment by the ANC], because so many South African passport holders came through London and so many South Africans were studying in London.’ (2013a COHP p. 11). South Africa House, home of the South African Embassy, on Trafalgar Square just five minutes walk from Marlborough House, was a public focus for anti-apartheid campaigning from the 1950s onwards – including a non-stop picket outside the building from 1986 to 1990 (Brown & Yaffe, 2014). At the Royal Commonwealth Society, close by, Thabo Mbeki and other members of the ANC met regularly in the bar mixing with Commonwealth Secretariat staff and other Commonwealth diplomats (Craggs, 2009). The Royal Commonwealth Society Librarian walked past the non-stop picket every morning, signaling her support and gathering their campaign materials for the Society’s archive (Barringer, personal communication). In a further example of how these networks intersected, Abdul Minty, the South African Honorary-Secretary of the Anti-Apartheid Movement explained how, through London, anti-apartheid campaigners connected with other nationalist leaders visiting for talks over decolonisation:

When Nyerere came to London for constitutional talks (for the independence of Tanganyika), I met him and because we had an office of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, we interacted with him regularly. And so we got to know him and other Commonwealth leaders who came there for similar talks. (2013 COHP p. 1).

London’s imperial history also meant that the city remained a central hub in air transport networks not just for those travelling to the UK but also for those travelling between Commonwealth countries (Zook & Brunn, 2005). This mattered because many made stopovers in London, scheduling meetings or renewing acquaintances. Stopping over in London even provided opportunities for snatched conversations as in the quotation below, where Ramphal recalled an incident after the Havana Non-Aligned Meeting of 1979. At the meeting, Michael Manley of Jamaica:

tore up his prepared speech and made a hell-raising speech in support of Fidel Castro ... I got a call at the Secretariat from the airport [London Heathrow]. It was Julius Nyerere, going back home from Cuba, and he asked me to come and see him at the airport. He was changing planes, so I went up and he used me as a kind of battering ram to vent his anger about Michael ... Because Julius saw that the future of non-alignment lay in *non-alignment*! (2013a COHP p. 9)

These experiences, networks, and spaces accreted, and together, created a particular geography of sometimes elite, but also subaltern space, agency and action in a part of the capital still shaped by imperial urban planning and (anti)colonial histories.

## Conclusion

### *Practising and placing commonwealth geopolitics*

In the 25 years after the foundation of the Commonwealth Secretariat, new Commonwealth geopolitical cultures were actively constructed through the labour of successive Secretaries General, Secretariat staff, and other politicians, diplomats and activists. Within the Commonwealth other agendas and important cleavages remained. India and Pakistan were at war for some of this period, many Asian countries became frustrated by the Commonwealth’s focus on Africa in these decades, and the Caribbean was split in two after the US invasion of Grenada in 1983. For the majority of these years much of the Commonwealth deplored successive UK governments’ policies towards Rhodesia and South Africa. Nevertheless, under successive Secretaries

General, the Commonwealth Secretariat became a legitimate international actor, respected especially by many newly independent member governments, and was able to articulate a coherent and increasingly powerful position regarding social and racial justice (Onslow, 2015).

The Commonwealth Secretary General, staff and national leaders had to negotiate broader structures – of funding, regional and institutional politics – that often restricted their ability to act as they wished. The Commonwealth pursued an increasingly radical agenda that ran counter to some of the priorities of its largest funders (including the UK), and aligned itself with the needs of post-colonial countries that had little financial clout. Some of its most powerful advocates were post-colonial elites, who, despite their status, were nevertheless in a subaltern global position. Nevertheless, the UK remained committed to the Commonwealth as a soft power mechanism and symbol of continued relations with the former empire. They, alongside other large Commonwealth funders like Canada, also saw value in the organisation as a demonstration of their commitment to ‘third world’ development. Thus whilst asymmetries structured the ability of post-colonial leaders, and the Secretariat, to act, this continued commitment from a wide range of member states, provided space for the production of new Commonwealth visions and practices. In addition as I have shown, these power asymmetries were also used productively to claim moral authority and create solidarities. These affective relations made space for a surprising amount of agency for the Commonwealth. Whilst its impact should not be overemphasised, the Commonwealth can claim to have influenced the process of Zimbabwean independence, the fight for justice in South Africa and broader debates about inequality (Chan, 1989). It also worked on practical measures to support newly independent countries, providing support to renegotiate natural resource concessions, and lobbying successfully for debt relief for the poorest countries (Battay, 2016; Murphy, 2011). As Sharp (2011a) has argued, the notion of subaltern geopolitics is most effective when it explores and offers creative, lived, alternative ways of doing geopolitics. Whilst they were not always successful, I argue that after 1965, successive Secretaries General, alongside Secretariat staff and national leaders attempted to create space through the Commonwealth for a different vision for global politics, and practical strategies to support this. In focusing on these visions, the paper has drawn attention to non-Western (and not-only-Western) articulations of geopolitical thought and practice, addressing critical geopolitics’ clear Western bias (Sharp, 2013).

### *Practising and placing subaltern geopolitics*

Focusing on the foundation and development of the Commonwealth Secretariat offers an opportunity to progress our understandings of subaltern geopolitics. Echoing the arguments of Joanne Sharp (2013), here I have demonstrated the value of taking seriously post-colonial elites as subaltern actors – neither entirely within or outside – hegemonic geopolitics, actors who are creative, mobile, and dynamic contributors to rethinking and remaking international relations.

Turning to every day practice rather than the discourse of speeches and writings can highlight the messy, ambivalent ways in which geopolitics is practised. In the Commonwealth context, this involved claiming legitimacy through public performances and protocols, but also through differentiation from hegemonic, and colonial, geopolitics. This differentiation was constructed through speeches, but also through networking, tours, institutional developments and relationships. Affective social relations matter in politics (Brown & Pickerill, 2009; Legg, 2016). Familiarity allowed Commonwealth actors to travel, meet, and converse with ease. Friendship and solidarity are more active practices that were crucial in undergirding the Commonwealth as something both meaningful and meaningfully different.

Subaltern geopolitical projects are the product, at least in part, of particular histories and geographies. In the case of the Commonwealth, overlapping political and ideological networks brought together anti-colonialism and other alternative and regional political projects

including non-alignment and anti-apartheid. These networks were the product of the particular historical juncture of the mid-twentieth century. Commonwealth Secretaries General and Secretariat staff brought with them networks and allegiances that shifted visions of the association from one centred on a few white leaders around the fire at Downing Street to a much more diverse, activist association whose actions centred on Southern Africa, and whose networks also included the Caribbean, South Asia and the Pacific alongside Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and the UK. The particular geographies of subaltern geopolitical projects too deserve further attention. Focusing on the particular sites and spaces which animated the Commonwealth highlights the importance of a range of new and familiar, post-colonial and imperial, places to the association. The post-1965 Commonwealth was animated by, and formed through, new spaces. It was oriented towards the Third World, and particularly Southern Africa. The fight for economic and racial justice were central to how the organisation projected itself and the networks through which its political action were enabled. Despite this emphasis on new spaces however, London remained central. It was a familiar space of shared history for many of the key Commonwealth leaders and Secretariat staff, as well as the site of the Secretariat itself. The Commonwealth's legitimacy and action was underpinned by these shared geographies which formed part of a broader shared Commonwealth culture. This was not the same shared culture of the British world of 'kith and kin' that had existed before (and indeed was imagined in opposition to this) but was shaped by a common experience of British colonialism that influenced education, language, and professional norms and networks. These shared imaginative geographies and experiences were subaltern and anti-colonial as much as they were also British and imperial.

Oral histories, though rarely used in political geography, can provide important insights for thinking through subaltern (and hegemonic) geopolitics. They reveal day-to-day practices, the importance of personal relationships, and the relevance of overlapping spaces and shared experiences within the work of international institutions like the Commonwealth. Highlighting transnational relationships of solidarity, they can help to undermine the national frames of many archival collections and accounts (Alexander et al., 2017). Oral histories which focus on the careers of politicians and diplomats – often over many years – highlight the way that individuals were recruited, and carried with them connections – political, educational, ideological – throughout their careers. In the oral histories we get a keen sense of a shared cosmopolitan world that many Commonwealth leaders, as well as Commonwealth Secretariat staff, shared and how these connections meant that work got done. We also get a sense of the longevity of many of these ideas and connections, which continued to matter over lifetimes. Oral histories have been used here to explore the contributions of (mainly, though not solely, male) political leaders and high level bureaucrats – subaltern in their positioning within an international system and through their association with alternative geopolitical visions. However, oral histories also hold potential to open up the category of subaltern geopolitical actor still further to include those (often women) working as PAs, translators, typists and cleaners, who have until recently been left out of diplomatic history entirely (Herren, 2016, 2017; McCarthy, 2016).

Taking seriously the precise practices, affective relations, histories and geographies of Commonwealth geopolitics allows the nebulous notion of a shared Commonwealth culture to be pinned down. But these important, but often overlooked, realms of political practice are important far beyond the Commonwealth. Everyday labour, emotional and affective social relationships, and particular histories and geographies shape all political projects and deserve to be placed more centrally in future research in political geography and beyond.

## Conflicts of interest

None.

## Acknowledgments

This paper was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council as part of a wider project: An Oral History of the Modern Commonwealth 1965–2010. Reference: AH/J006548/1. Thank you to Paul Ashmore, Katherine Brickell, Tim Livsey, Philip Murphy, Sue Onslow, Andrew Dilley and participants at the Rethinking the Commonwealth Symposium at the University of Aberdeen, and the Contested Development Research Domain at King's College London for their comments on earlier drafts. The three reviewers, and the editor Fiona McConnell, also provided very helpful feedback.

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